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April 3, 1972

Henry:

I think it is quite important that we not bludgeon Laird on issues on which he has clean skirts. Such is the case on the recent exchange on air authorities.

On 8 March, he sent a memorandum to the President (Tab A) which in effect recommended the extension of authorities to conduct selective limited duration strikes against occupied SAM sites in the lower NVN Panhandle. I conveyed your concerns to Pursley per your instructions. He stated that the Secretary really did not want to extend the authorities at that time in any event.

Subsequently, on 10 March, after bugging from us, Laird sent over a brief memorandum (Tab B) noting that MACV had requested on 8 March authority to reinstitute the unlimited tactical air and naval gunfire operations in North Vietnam south of 18°. In this memorandum, Laird noted that the new authorities requested by Abrams should be studied seriously but no additional steps should be taken to increase Abrams' authorities. He noted that he would send an additional memorandum on March 13.

On March 14, almost true to his word, Laird sent an additional memorandum (Tab C) referring to a request from the Chairman which also requested additional air authority. This involved a request for permission to conduct air and naval gunfire attacks against NVN south of 18° North until May 1st. In this memorandum, Laird clearly stated that it would not be wise to accede to this request. Laird did, however, recommend authorizing three 24-hour strikes against occupied SAM sites in a limited L-shape area closest to the DMA and Laotian border.

On March 18, you sent a memorandum to the President (Tab D) in which you recommend against granting additional authorities at that time until a clear provocation had developed. The President approved that recommendation and sent to Laird a memorandum dated March 18 (Tab E).

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In essence, it is unfair to peck at Laird on this one. It was this office (at your direction and with the approval of the President) that prevented any strikes against the SAM sites in the L-shaped target area that had been threatening increasingly our air operations in Laos and in and south of the DMZ.

Al Haig

Attachment